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## An Evolving University-School Partnership: The University of Notre Dame Magnificat Schools

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*For the past 15 years, Catholic colleges and universities have developed programs serving Catholic K-12 schools by preparing teachers and leaders for Catholic school contexts. University-school partnerships provide an opportunity for Catholic institutions of higher education to extend beyond developing human resources to strengthen Catholic K-12 schools to effect comprehensive school reform. This article describes the origins and evolution of one such university-school partnership initiative, the University of Notre Dame's Magnificat School partnerships. This article presents an analysis of program evaluation data from the first 3 years of the Magnificat partnerships and a discussion of how the lessons learned in this program evaluation have informed revisions to the Magnificat model. Additionally, these lessons can inform the efforts of other colleges and universities that may seek to engage Catholic K-12 schools to effect comprehensive school reform.*

In a recent address to a gathering of officials from Catholic colleges and universities, president of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, Anthony Bryk (2009), described the three primary roles that institutions of higher education can play in the field of K-12 schooling. Bryk argued that colleges and universities involved in education can develop people; they can develop the tools, materials, and ideas that those people employ when teaching; and they can strengthen the institutions in which those people use those tools.

Bryk pointed toward programs like the University of Notre Dame's Alliance for Catholic Education (ACE) as an example of a Catholic university's attempt to tackle the first of these roles: developing people by recruiting and training new teachers. ACE—and its 14 peer programs that constitute the University Consortium for Catholic Education (UCCE)—seek to provide a pipeline of highly-qualified, committed teachers to under resourced Catholic schools across the country.

The development of ACE and the UCCE and the establishment of the group gathered to hear Bryk's address, the Catholic Higher Education Collaborative, all represent a relatively new engagement on the part of Catholic colleges and universities in the work of Catholic K-12 schooling. While these programs have done much to work collaboratively with Catholic elementary and high schools to develop human resources for Catholic K-12 schools, there have been only limited efforts among Catholic colleges and universities to enhance their capacity to address all three functions to achieve comprehensive school improvement.

Indeed, Catholic institutions of higher education have often failed to engage meaningfully with Catholic K-12 schools. Teacher education programs in Catholic colleges and universities typically focus exclusively on preparing teachers for public schools, and few provide specific preparation for the context of the Catholic school classroom (Watzke, 2002). Outreach efforts to Catholic elementary and secondary schools have been limited as well. To be sure, a handful of committed Catholic colleges and universities have maintained strong ties to Catholic K-12 schools (Heft, 2008), but at the national level, the vast majority of parish schools experience little or no meaningful connections with higher education. A recent study suggests that more than 83% of United States pastors with schools do not experience any support from Catholic institutions of higher education, while 66% of pastors do not feel the mission of their schools to be supported by Catholic colleges or universities (Nuzzi, Frabutt, & Holter, 2008). Another finding of the pastor study reveals the extent to which this lack of engagement represents a missed opportunity. Nuzzi, Frabutt, and Holter found that pastors whose schools do experience the support of Catholic colleges and universities "demonstrate significant, positive increases in their evaluation of the worth, quality, access, and governance of Catholic schools," leading them to suggest that "Catholic institutions of higher education may play a pivotal role in promoting positive perceptions and attitudes toward Catholic schools [among pastors] by supporting their mission through university-school partnerships" (p. 26).

This article describes the efforts of one Catholic university, the University of Notre Dame, to move beyond "developing people" toward a more comprehensive effort to strengthen K-12 Catholic schools through the establishment of a university-school partnership called the Magnificat Schools. This article describes the origins and evolution of three partnerships the University of Notre Dame established with individual urban Catholic schools beginning in 2006. These relationships represent the University of Notre Dame's first foray into comprehensive school improvement, and the following description of the initial years of the Magnificat experience offers some perspective on both

the needs of urban Catholic schools and the value of a variety of services and supports Catholic institutions of higher education might offer those schools. This article describes early program evaluation findings that inform some of the "lessons learned" by the university, providing insight into how teachers and administrators have perceived the partnerships in its initial years. The goal of this article is to reflect on the University of Notre Dame's experience of university-school partnership in the hopes that it might inform other institutions considering relationships between Catholic higher education and K-12 schools.

### **The University of Notre Dame and University-School Partnerships**

Despite the low levels of engagement with Catholic higher education reported by pastors (Nuzzi et al., 2008), a growing number of Catholic higher education institutions have sought to reengage with Catholic K-12 schools in recent years. The development of ACE and the UCCE programs represent instances of Catholic colleges and universities serving Catholic K-12 schools by recruiting, preparing, placing, and supporting a cadre of educators for Catholic schools. Because the Magnificat School initiative emerged as a function of the development of the University of Notre Dame's ACE program, it is helpful to provide a brief overview of the development of ACE.

In 1993, 20 years after it closed its department of education, the University of Notre Dame returned to the field of Catholic education with a program designed to place teachers in under resourced Catholic schools. Father Timothy Scully, CSC, and Father Sean McGraw, CSC, founded the Alliance for Catholic Education, placing 40 teachers in Catholic elementary and secondary schools in eight dioceses across the southern United States (McGraw & Scully, 2002; Pressley, 2002). ACE provides an intensive 2-year service experience encompassing professional teacher preparation, community life, and spiritual growth. ACE now annually supports nearly 200 teachers in over 100 elementary and secondary Catholic schools in 33 communities from coast to coast. Approximately 1,000 ACE graduates have served Catholic schools over the past 15 years, and more than 70% of them have remained in education beyond their 2-year commitment to the program (Dallavis, 2002, 2007). While ACE has reached its capacity to develop and support teachers, other colleges and universities have adopted the ACE model. In 1998, the University of Notre Dame, Boston College, and the University of Portland formed the University Consortium for Catholic Education, which now includes 15 Catholic colleges and universities that have established programs similar to ACE to prepare teachers for Catholic elementary and high schools (P. A. Smith, 2007).

While ACE stands as a prime example of a university seeking to “develop people,” it proved to be a first step toward more comprehensive engagement with Catholic K-12 schools for the University of Notre Dame. The university’s next step toward supporting Catholic K-12 schools came with the establishment of the ACE Leadership Program in 2002, which was dedicated to preparing Catholic school principals and administrators. In the process of working with more than 100 Catholic schools in dozens of dioceses across the country, ACE personnel began to recognize certain challenges facing contemporary Catholic schools, and in 2005 the University of Notre Dame began seriously to consider requests from diocesan superintendents and principals to engage more substantially with individual schools. In 2006, the University of Notre Dame moved definitively beyond “developing people” to consider how the university might support schools comprehensively when it commissioned a national task force to study the state of Catholic schooling in the United States. The task force interviewed principals, pastors, and superintendents to inform its final report (Notre Dame Task Force on Catholic Education, 2006), which suggested that Catholic schools would benefit from more comprehensive university support in order to survive in the short term and thrive in the long term. The task force found that “diocesan schools’ offices are in many cases too understaffed, overworked, or stretched thin to provide the resources and attention necessary” (p. 9) for struggling urban Catholic schools. To address this need, the task force suggested that colleges and universities engage in university-school partnerships that would offer schools instructional and curricular support through professional development as well as financial and managerial support through consulting services. The task force ultimately recognized that Catholic higher education “stands in a unique position to offer useful partnerships” (p. 9) to urban Catholic K-12 schools, and the task force formally recommended greater engagement with those schools on the part of all Catholic colleges and universities.

A review of the research related to university-school partnerships revealed enormous potential for colleges and universities to serve K-12 schools. In particular, research identifies particular benefits to schools engaged in university partnerships, including high-quality, research-based professional development, additional resources for schools and teachers, and networking opportunities (Borthwick, Stirling, Nauman, & Cook, 2003).

To respond to the requests of dioceses and to the recommendation of the task force and informed by research on university-school partnership benefits, the university established the Notre Dame Magnificat Schools, a model of university-school partnership in which the University of Notre Dame, upon the invitation of the diocese, worked to empower individual Catholic

elementary schools in efforts to improve their leadership, academic quality, financial management, and vitality.

### **Establishing Partnerships**

The following section describes in detail the “nuts and bolts” of the Magnificat School partnerships, both to provide context for the research findings discussed later and to provide an example for other institutions that may be considering university-school partnerships. This section will describe the parameters of the agreements between the University of Notre Dame and the schools and will describe the services and supports provided to the schools by the university.

In 2006, with the support of a 5-year grant from a national foundation, the University of Notre Dame formalized its efforts to support K-12 Catholic education through the Notre Dame Magnificat Schools. According to the original Magnificat School mission statement, the university sought to “form partnerships with individual urban, at-risk Catholic schools to achieve comprehensive school improvement” (Johnstone, 2006, p. 1). The mechanism for achieving that goal lay in “mobilizing the assets of the University of Notre Dame to build each school’s capacity over a 5-year period” in order to “more fully realize the vision of Catholic schools as vital and indispensable resources for the Catholic community” (p. 1). The word “partnership” was deliberately chosen to underscore the university’s intention to work in collaboration with individual school communities because, according to Shive (1984), strong university-school partnerships operate with “agreement on mutually accepted goals and objectives, as well as a means of achieving them” (p. 119). The agreement defining the Magnificat partnership designated specific responsibilities for both the university and the schools, and schools were chosen according to a number of criteria. First, the university sought to partner with diocesan parish schools with demonstrated need, defined by low socioeconomic status of the students, marginal performance of students on standardized achievement tests, downward trends in enrollment, high faculty turnover, or a high number of unlicensed faculty members. Second, schools were required to indicate a willingness to hire a graduate of the ACE Leadership Program as principal and ACE and UCCE graduates for teacher openings. Third, the university required that schools be willing to establish a governance model that ensured input from the university, the parish, the parents, and the local community.

For their part, the schools agreed to offer the university a site for the ongoing professional development of ACE and UCCE graduates, and

University of Notre Dame faculty members gained a site for continuing research on Catholic education. Empirical research on student enrollment, faculty retention, student achievement, school stakeholder satisfaction, and strategic planning processes and results would be collected to inform practice in the school, to expand the research base on Catholic education more broadly, and to enable rigorous evaluation and adaptation of the university-school partnership model.

In its first 2 years, Notre Dame entered into 5-year partnership agreements with three pilot Magnificat Schools: St. Adalbert in South Bend, St. Ann in Chicago, and Holy Redeemer in Washington, D.C. Ultimately, the university sought to develop a network of partner schools that is sustainable, replicable, and scalable, with the hope that the Magnificat model might serve as a template for other Catholic universities that seek to extend their engagement in Catholic K-12 schools. The goal of the partnership in its inception was to empower principals, pastors, boards, and parents by providing the knowledge and skills needed to enhance and maintain the quality of each school into the future. The 5-year partnership with the university was designed to serve as a much-needed "shot in the arm" for the schools, helping them to realize a strengthened Catholic school community, increased and stabilized enrollment, and improved student achievement. The key metrics for success were identified as improvement in student achievement scores, increases in enrollment, and stability in teacher retention.

To achieve those goals, Magnificat Schools were offered a number of services from the university that could be organized into three primary domains: continuous assessment of key success factors, intensive professional support and development, and resources specific to the instructional needs of the school. The university provided six services, listed in Figure 1 and described in detail below, to each of the pilot Magnificat Schools, beginning in 2006 in Chicago and South Bend and in 2007 in Washington, D.C. Additionally, the university made an additional set of five services and supports, detailed below, available to the schools upon request.

### *Data collection*

University staff conducted a baseline assessment of school data, compiling as much as a decade's worth of enrollment, staffing, and student achievement data where available. Additionally, the university formed an assessment committee comprised of faculty members in sociology, psychology, and education, which established plans to collect data annually for the duration of the 5-year partnership.

Service	Timeline
Data collection and analysis	Year 1-Year 5
Instructional coaching	Year 1-Year 3
Curricular and instructional resources	Year 1-Year 5
ACE Consulting Services	Year 3-Year 5
Data-driven instruction training and teaching modules	Year 1-Year 5
Strategic Intervention Team training and support	Year 1-Year 5
School board formation, training, and support	As requested
Technology assessment and planning	As requested
Grant-writing assistance	As requested
Parent education modules	As requested
Ethical education curriculum	As requested

*Figure 1. Services and supports provided to Magnificat schools.*

### ***Instructional Coaching***

Because research suggests that universities are particularly well positioned to offer K-12 schools high-quality, research-based professional development (Borthwick et al., 2003), the university hired a part-time instructional coach for each school to work closely with individual teachers and to lead faculty improvement efforts. Coaches had extensive classroom experience, and, in some cases, were experienced principals. Instructional coaches were to be provided only in the first 3 years of the partnership, at which time the local school boards would be expected to determine whether to establish the coach as a regular faculty position. On a weekly basis, coaches provided intensive, on-site, and ongoing one-on-one support for individual teachers. On a monthly basis, coaches prepared and led professional development for the entire faculty. Coaches worked closely with faculty and staff at the university via weekly phone conferences to prepare professional development sessions, which were focused on applying the principles of backward planning (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005), a research-supported approach to curriculum, instruction, and assessment that focuses on developing and deepening student learning by designing goal-oriented lessons and units.

### ***Curricular and Instructional Resources***

Research also underscores the potential for universities to address specific instructional needs in schools (Borthwick et al., 2003), and so the university made funds available to the schools for curricular and instructional resources each year. To receive these funds, teachers and administrators were required to apply to the university, describing how the funds would be allocated to improve student achievement. Schools were required to demonstrate how analysis of student achievement data was used to make decisions about which curricular and instructional resources would be requested.

### ***Consulting Services***

The 2006 Notre Dame Task Force on Catholic Education found that Catholic K-12 schools needed particular help with managing school finances; thus, in 2008, the university offered to each school the services of ACE Consulting, a new consulting firm established at the university designed to serve under resourced Catholic schools. ACE Consulting was made available to conduct a comprehensive needs assessment of the entire school operation and to lead school stakeholders through a strategic planning process. As part of this relationship, ACE Consulting was available to assist school leadership in the formation of a financial plan, a development plan, and a plan for enhancing the Catholic identity of the school.

### ***Data-driven Instruction***

University of Notre Dame staff and faculty provided in-service training to teachers to prepare them to use student achievement data to make curricular and instructional decisions. Additionally, experienced classroom teachers based at the university used Magnificat School achievement data to develop targeted instructional modules for Magnificat School teachers in Grades 2-5. Modules focused on language arts standards were made available to teachers in year 2 of the partnership and were revised annually to continue targeting specific state standards based on student achievement data. These modules, designed to address the specific standards identified as weaknesses by student achievement data, consisted of mini-lessons that teachers could use to supplement their instruction.

### ***Strategic Intervention Team Training***

Teachers and principals were trained to employ the university's Strategic Intervention Team (SIT) program, a general education intervention program



that provides assistance to classroom teachers whose students may have learning and/or behavioral difficulties. SIT training was provided to each school during each of the first 2 years of the partnership and annual professional development sessions were scheduled to ensure the ongoing strength of the program.

### *Additional Services and Supports*

Additional services and supports were offered as well, though not every school made use of university resources in these areas. These particular services and supports were offered to capitalize on the particular areas of expertise of university faculty and staff involved with the partnerships and in dialogue with school leaders about individual school needs.

*School boards.* For schools that did not previously have boards, the university assisted in forming new boards, according to diocesan guidelines, that shared responsibilities for school governance with pastors and diocesan school offices. Additionally, the university made board training available to schools and placed a member of the ACE staff on each board.

*Technology assessment and planning.* Schools were encouraged to utilize the services of a technology consultant housed in the university's Institute for Educational Initiatives to conduct a technology inventory and to assist schools in forming a plan for using technology to improve student achievement.

*Grant-writing assistance.* University faculty and staff offered assistance to teachers and principals to write and implement grants from local and national foundations.

*Parent education.* University faculty members were made available to prepare and deliver parent education modules for schools upon request.

*Ethical education curriculum.* An ethical education curriculum, created by nationally renowned experts in moral and ethical development among the university psychology faculty, was offered to schools.

Finally, two other services were developed in the first few years of the partnerships that were not a part of the original agreement. First, the University of Notre Dame's ACE program tapped into its network of graduates and families to establish an annual fundraising appeal to raise scholarship funds for the

Magnificat Schools. Second, University of Notre Dame benefactors provided additional funds to create faculty fellowships for Magnificat School teachers. These competitive fellowships made funds available to teachers who sought to engage in additional professional development.

### Research Design

Since the inception of the Magnificat initiative, the university has been committed to conducting ongoing program evaluation and careful assessment of partnership outcomes to ensure that school needs would be addressed appropriately and efficiently. The literature on university-school partnerships suggests that successful partnerships are marked by a willingness to negotiate and revise the terms of relationships to solve problems throughout the duration of the relationship, and that regular evaluation and assessment of partnerships is critical to the long-term health of the relationship (Borthwick et al., 2003; Osguthorpe, 1996). Magnificat program evaluation efforts, therefore, began almost immediately upon the establishment of initial partnerships. Even before reliable quantitative data on student achievement, enrollment trends, and teacher retention could be analyzed, the university engaged in qualitative program evaluation to inform efforts to revise and adapt the model to improve its service to the schools.

These program evaluation efforts also provided the university an opportunity to establish the strong and clear lines of communication the literature suggests is needed for high-quality partnerships (Clark, 1999; Essex, 2001; Thorkildsen & Stein, 1996). University faculty and staff made regular visits to all three pilot Magnificat Schools in 2006 and 2007, and in 2008 a university team began conducting interviews with dozens of stakeholders at each school. Additionally, the program evaluation team conducted a survey of all teachers and administrators in the schools in fall 2008. Surveys were developed and administered electronically using online survey software. The survey consisted of a short series of open-ended response items designed to identify teacher perceptions of school strengths and challenges and to gather information about how the teachers valued the Magnificat partnership. Additionally, teachers were asked to offer suggestions for enhancing the Magnificat partnerships. Thirty teachers and administrators from all three schools completed the survey. Teachers were asked eight questions about their schools and the Magnificat partnerships. They were encouraged to identify their schools' greatest strengths, their unique features, and the major challenges facing the schools. Additionally, teachers were asked to comment on the ways in which Magnificat had contributed to their schools thus far and they were asked for

recommendations about how Magnificat might be improved to serve their needs better.

### *Analysis Procedures*

Survey responses were analyzed using NVIVO 8 qualitative analysis software, which allowed for the coding and retrieval of data points and for the clustering of teacher responses into themes. Data were initially reviewed and coded using the principles of open coding (Charmaz, 2006, 2008; Strauss & Corbin, 1998), and codes were then clustered and collapsed into critical themes. Additionally, interview fieldnotes were analyzed and themes common to both surveys and interviews were developed that represent the key findings of the larger evaluation project.

### **Results**

The key themes identified in analysis of survey, interview, and fieldnote data included general support for the partnership, the need for clarity in program mission and identity, the dynamics surrounding building internal and external community in the schools, the identification of particularly successful supports and services, and the ever-present problem of school finances. These themes, which are listed in Figure 2 along with illustrative examples of each, inform the "lessons learned" that will shape both revisions to the current 5-year partnerships as well as plans for future partnerships between the university and K-12 Catholic schools.

Themes	Illustrative Examples
General support for university-school partnership	"Teaching in a Magnificat School means...I am in a position of possibility."
Need for clarity of program identity and mission	"Some people here don't even know what it means [to teach in a Magnificat School]."
Building internal and external community	"The thing that our school does best is build community."
Effective services and supports	"Our instructional coach has been a tremendous help to me."
Salary matters	"Money is a huge factor. Pay is the key. I don't know why anyone would leave this school other than for money."

Figure 2. Key themes.

### *General Support for University-School Partnership*

Overall there was great enthusiasm for the partnership with the University of Notre Dame among teachers and staff members interviewed and surveyed. One teacher in Chicago captured the positive tone of most interactions when she explained her approval of Magnificat by saying, "I think it is the responsibility of Catholic universities to support failing Catholic elementary schools." When asked if she considered her school to be "failing," she replied, "Not anymore. We have new people, fresh ideas, new resources, a renewed vision, more experience, and [the ACE-trained principal's] leadership. Enrollment is even on the right track." A Washington, D.C. teacher described the implementation of Magnificat as "awesome, like night and day" as compared to the school pre-Magnificat. She added, "Magnificat and the community are why I came back to Holy Redeemer this year."

When asked what it means to teachers that they teach in a Magnificat School, most responded positively. One teacher wrote, "I know that by teaching in a Magnificat School, I will always be supported as a teacher. I know I have access to resources that [are] normally out of reach for most urban Catholic educators." Some teachers indicated in their responses that the provision of instructional coaches and resources serve as incentives to continue teaching at the school. One teacher wrote, "The resources which [the University of Notre Dame] provides...make it very appealing to teachers to stay." Because each of the three schools had struggled with high teacher turnover in recent years, comments that suggested that the Magnificat partnership contributed to teacher career decisions were particularly positive signs of program success.

### *Need for Clarity in Program Identity and Mission*

The initial open-ended question on the survey asked teachers, "What does teaching in a Magnificat School mean to you?" The goal of this survey item was to identify which dimensions of the partnership were most salient for teachers and administrators. Responses included 22 different ways of identifying "what it means" to teach in a Magnificat school, including some markers of program identity that were not actually elements of the partnership agreement. For example, some teachers identified the provision of a reading specialist as a defining feature of Magnificat, though that position was created by the principal independent of the Magnificat partnership. The broad diversity of responses received suggests that the terms of the partnership and the mission of the program need clarification.

Two teachers commented explicitly in the survey that they were unsure what it means for the school to be a Magnificat School. One wrote, "It has not been clearly stated to the teachers at our Magnificat School what Magnificat is and is not." Despite this lack of clarity, the teacher went on to report, "I think that teaching at a Magnificat School could be a wonderful opportunity for professional growth and could provide teachers with resources to enhance their teaching." The other teacher in this cluster reported that, in the initial years of the relationship, "I felt frustrated by what I perceived to be a real lack of presence at the school on [the University of Notre Dame]'s part." These responses echo the comment of a Washington, D.C. teacher who explained in an interview that "so far [the Magnificat partnership] hasn't meant a ton. Some people here don't even know what it means." When asked to elaborate, she explained, "It seems that Magnificat is a mission or philosophy of education that all of the teachers need to buy into, and I'm not sure yet whether everyone is on board. I think it needs to be articulated better to get all the teachers to understand what it is and how they fit into it."

This call for clarity is echoed in responses to a later question as well, which asked teachers to make recommendations to enhance Magnificat. Programmatic recommendations were targeted specifically toward the need for clarification of Magnificat's role, its mission, and the long-term prospects for partnership between the schools and university. Some teachers expressed anxiety about the partnership's 5-year term, with one writing, "I'm a bit concerned about what happens when our 5 years are up. I think it will be difficult for St. Ann to transition out of the program and stand on our own legs...I would like to better understand where we go from here." Others called for increased university personnel to be dedicated to supporting the schools and for a greater presence of university staff in the buildings. One teacher wrote that Magnificat "seemed mysterious in the past, like an unseen benefactor," which left him asking "Who is running this program behind the big curtain?"

Finally, teachers argued for increasing awareness of Magnificat among students, with one suggesting, "I feel like our students have no idea that we have this partnership with Notre Dame because the teachers are unsure of what exactly being a Magnificat school is. Students should feel a sense of pride in knowing that they are attending a school that is partnered with Notre Dame."

### *Building Internal and External Community*

When asked what the school does best, teachers and administrators overwhelmingly described the community dimension of the school by a 2-to-1

margin over all other categories of response. The largest number of responses were clustered under the code “builds collegial community among teachers,” with a typical response captured by the teacher who wrote,

Our school is based upon a community who works together to achieve a mission for transforming our school both academically and spiritually. The thing that our school does best is build community...I love this about our school. I feel connected, appreciated, and loved here.

Another teacher commented that the school is a special place to work because “we pray as a faculty and care about each other.” Similarly, when asked what makes the school unique, teachers’ and administrators’ responses were most often coded as references to “family, home, or community atmosphere.” School personnel clearly saw the formation of internal school community—community among those inside the building—as a critical strength. A teacher in the Magnificat School in South Bend wrote, “St. Adalbert’s fosters a loving community within its walls...St. Adalbert’s feels like family, because it is family.” Another teacher commented that a “feeling of family connectedness and ‘a second-home’ permeates everything we do.”

The benefits of a strong school community redound to the teachers in particular, because the strength of the community contributes to positive feelings about work conditions. A teacher in Chicago wrote that “St. Ann has the best working environment I’ve ever experienced. There is an atmosphere of collaboration and goodwill. These things make the school a wonderful place to work.” The benefits of strong internal community also affect students, because, as one teacher noted, a collegial faculty “creates a family atmosphere where children feel safe and cared for.”

While several teachers discussed the strength of school community in the context of the school’s designation as a Magnificat School, it is unclear how teachers viewed the strength of school community as a function of the university-school partnership, although responses to the question about “what it means” to teach in a Magnificat School suggest some possibilities. In particular, respondents noted the value of Magnificat as being “part of something bigger,” suggesting that the strength of the school community is related to the school’s membership in the larger Magnificat network. One teacher commented that the school’s Magnificat status “means that we are not an island without hope, but part of a network that is far-reaching.” Another teacher noted that “it means teachers are never alone in their struggles in the classroom.” This teacher made the connection between teacher support and student achievement, suggesting that the strengthened community of teachers

result in a school where "students can benefit immeasurably as well." Another teacher suggested that the partnership and support led to feelings of teacher empowerment, stating that the Magnificat partnership led the teacher to believe that "I am in a position of possibility."

When asked about challenges the schools face, however, teachers and principals pointed toward the need to strengthen the larger school community and to build bridges to the local community, which included parents and parish and civic leaders. Similarly, the majority of suggestions about how Magnificat might serve schools better clustered around the need for support in reaching out to parents and the local community. In particular, when asked how Magnificat might help the school, stakeholders focused primarily on the need for high-quality support to enhance their capacity to work with English Language Learners and with getting parents involved in the school community.

### *Effective Services and Supports*

There was targeted enthusiasm for some particular dimensions of the partnership; specifically, school personnel identified the provision of the instructional coach as the most valuable component of the program in its initial years. The most common responses to the question "What does teaching in a Magnificat School mean to you?" referred to the provision of the instructional coach and instructional resources, with more than a third of respondents mentioning these two services directly. Nearly half of all teachers suggested that the partnership should continue to focus on providing on-site, long-term professional development through the coaches. Others noted the need for continued financial support and instructional resources, and two suggested the "general support" of the university was itself of great value. One teacher exclaimed in an interview, "The instructional coach is really good—she saved me so much time last year. That's ideal. She really pushes me, like a real coach, and the evaluation and feedback she provides is invaluable."

While the instructional coaches represented the most valuable dimension of the program, they were also the target of the most suggestions for program improvement. Nearly a quarter of the recommendations made focused on the terms of the instructional coaching arrangement. Several teachers encouraged the university to direct the instructional coaches to spend more time attending to school-specific needs and less time devoted to professional development. Teachers seemed to appreciate the in-class, one-on-one support provided by instructional coaches, but some felt the time spent applying the principles of *Understanding by Design* (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005) to lesson planning

could have been better spent providing more individualized coaching support. Nearly every teacher who commented on the instructional coach noted how the coach improved his or her individual instruction, with comments like “our instructional coach has been a tremendous help to me.” Others encouraged the university to consider expanding the instructional coach position. One teacher commented, “I would love to see the [instructional coach] position continue beyond 5 years. It is such a terrific thing for our school! I would also be interested in how the [instructional coach] position could be expanded.” Another wrote, “I like the educational specialist model but I would love to see someone in that position full time.”

Similarly, teachers proclaimed appreciation for the instructional and curricular resources schools were able to purchase with funds from Magnificat. All of the schools badly needed upgrades to classroom resources and materials, and teachers reported feeling empowered by the university’s approach to requesting resources, which encouraged teacher input in the decisions about which materials to purchase. One teacher noted in an interview that the new resources were what set Magnificat Schools apart from other struggling urban Catholic schools, saying, “We have better resources, and that’s the pathology of a lot of inner-city schools: lack of resources.”

### *Salary Matters*

The lack of resources described by this teacher affects more than the quality of instructional and curricular materials available to teachers; financial challenges ultimately affect teacher quality and effectiveness. Teachers in each of the Magnificat Schools raised the problem of low salaries, often suggesting that teaching in these schools can only ever be a temporary position given the schools’ inability to pay competitive salaries.

When one highly qualified teacher was asked how the university should dedicate its efforts to help the schools, she replied, “Think about strategies for retaining teachers. I know money is a huge factor. Pay is the key. I don’t know why anyone would leave this school other than for money.” Another teacher explained candidly that she would not be able to afford to stay at the school in the long term. When asked what it would take for her stay at the school, she replied regretfully, “More money.” She explained, “I have roommates, but if I ever want to live on my own, or get a new car, it’s just not in the cards with the money I can make here. I’ve made sacrifices, and I’ll continue to make them to stay in Catholic schools, but I look at [the teacher who left last year] and she makes double what I make now” at a local charter school. Sustainable school excellence will hinge largely on schools’ capacities to draw excellent



teachers. When schools are able to pay competitive salaries, the challenge of recruiting and retaining high-quality teachers will diminish.

### **Discussion: Lessons Learned**

The themes presented above inform the lessons the University of Notre Dame and schools have learned from this preliminary program evaluation. The lessons learned through the experience of the first 2 years of partnership and this evaluation process include:

- The partnership is strengthened and schools are better served by the process of ongoing program evaluation.
- Instructional coaching is a valuable service provided by the university.
- Instructional resources significantly contributed to increased teacher morale and sense of efficacy.
- The university might pay closer attention to supporting schools with financial management and fund-raising efforts.
- The university might further develop opportunities for teachers to network with other schools in the program.
- The schools need support with engaging the local community and building bridges between the school and home.
- The identity, mission, and expectations of the university-school partnership need to be clearly communicated and reinforced regularly.
- Given the financial challenges most urban Catholic schools face, schools need support in recruiting and retaining high-quality teachers.

The first lesson learned relates to the value of immediate and ongoing program evaluation. The survey and interview results presented here represent the beginning of an ongoing program evaluation project; changes to the Magnificat relationships have already been implemented based on these early evaluation exercises, and other changes are planned for the coming year. Additionally, regular lines of communication between the university and schools have been established to ensure the constant revision and adaptation of the model.

While each of the services and supports provided in the partnership was recognized by teachers and administrators, instructional coaching represents a particularly needed service universities can support in schools. The research literature is relatively thin on the effectiveness of instructional coaching (Toll, 2009), though several studies point toward the effectiveness of instructional coaching in improving student achievement (Joyce, Murphy, Showers, &

Murphy, 1989; Norton, 2001; Ross, 1992). Knight's (2006) argument that "by offering support, feedback, and intensive, individualized professional learning, coaching promises to be a better way to improve instruction in schools" and his claim that "preliminary research suggests that effective coaching programs make a difference" (p. 36) both resonate with Magnificat teacher responses. Some teachers suggested that the provision of instructional coaching was particularly appealing to early career teachers who are open to growth, who are dedicated to continuous improvement, and, importantly, who may not choose to stay in a low-paying job without this additional benefit. Instructional coaching, therefore, represents a two fold benefit to the school, as it both improves classroom instruction and contributes to the retention of teachers committed to continuous improvement and instructional excellence. Although the original Magnificat plan provided for instructional coaching in only the first 3 years of partnership, the immediate success of the instructional coaches led the University of Notre Dame to revise the original terms to extend the provision of instructional coaching to ensure that schools would receive this benefit for the duration of the partnership.

Improvements to instructional resources were also greatly needed and valued. Teachers expressed a belief that the provision of these resources—and the training for making data-driven decisions that informed their purchase—resulted in improved teaching and learning in the classroom. Although these beliefs are somewhat contradicted by educational research on the relationship between the provision of instructional resources and student achievement (Hanushek, 1997), teachers nevertheless felt strongly that these upgrades to school resources were critical to reforming the schools. The divergence from the literature, which suggests there is little relationship between school resources and educational achievement, may be explained by the fact that, prior to the partnership, these particular schools had suffered from years of financial distress, and, therefore, had unusually poor curricular and instructional resources. The schools were desperately in need of upgrades, and so their provision resulted in strong boosts to teacher morale. It remains to be seen whether the provision of these resources will have an effect on student learning.

These resources, however, cannot be provided indefinitely, and the need to pay close attention to school finances and consider focusing university efforts on development efforts represents another lesson learned. It is unsustainable for the university to provide constant funding, and so it is clear that schools need to increase development efforts to raise funds for instructional and curricular upgrades on their own in the future. Catholic universities might consider focusing on helping schools create and maintain development

efforts to enable the regular purchase of updated curricular and instructional materials. Additionally, financial consulting and training are needed to ensure the professional stewardship of resources. Schools have become small businesses, and colleges and universities might provide more assistance to principals and pastors to help them run these businesses efficiently and effectively.

Teachers in Magnificat Schools valued opportunities to network. They perceived the value of belonging to a national network of schools. This coupled with the suggestions that the University of Notre Dame's attention, support, and brand are perceived to be valuable to the school, suggest that the university might focus greater attention on facilitating relationships among schools in the program. Teacher desire to improve the networking dimension of the relationship is consistent with research literature that both promotes the development of networks to achieve school reform (Lieberman & Grolnick, 1996; Lieberman & Wood, 2002; A. K. Smith & Wohlstetter, 2001) and suggests positive outcomes for schools that participate in networks (Kahne, O'Brien, Brown, & Quinn, 2001; Wohlstetter, Malloy, Chau, & Polhemus, 2003; Wohlstetter & Smith, 2000). Catholic colleges and universities might focus on building networks of Catholic schools, providing the space and direction needed to share resources and best practices.

Responses from Magnificat teachers suggest that affiliations with colleges and universities appeal to teachers as well. In the case of Magnificat, more attention might be devoted to finding ways to leverage the University of Notre Dame brand more robustly to benefit the schools. For example, interviews with high-quality, early career teachers suggested that some were drawn to Magnificat schools because of the affiliation with the university. This finding suggests that teachers may have similar responses to university-school partnerships as pastors, who tend to be more engaged and invested in a school when they enjoy a partnership with a college or university (Nuzzi et al., 2008). The university needs to explore ways to leverage its appeal to this pool of teachers to both recruit and retain excellent teachers in the schools.

The responses related to building community within and outside the school indicate that teachers and administrators recognize clearly the value and strength of their school communities as school assets, and they indicate a desire to enhance the school's capacity to respond to the particular needs and strengths their students bring to the classroom. This dynamic resonates with Putnam's (2000) distinction between "bridging" and "bonding" social capital. According to Putnam, social networks can have two different functions—they can bond members of a similar community together and they can serve as a bridge between distinct communities. We can, therefore, talk about two different kinds of social capital: bridging capital, which enhances relationships

between insiders and outsiders, and bonding capital, which strengthens ties among insiders. In their survey and interview responses, Magnificat School teachers professed the schools' capacity to build in-school community as a major strength of their schools while simultaneously suggesting the need to enhance the schools' capacity to build bridges between the school and the students' home community. These responses confirm research suggesting that Catholic school faculties can successfully build bonding social capital within the school walls while struggling to form bridging social capital in the larger community (Dallavis, 2008). The university, therefore, ought to consider how it might support efforts to mobilize the strength of internal school communities to enhance the schools' engagement with their local communities. Additionally, teacher responses suggested that the university might better support the preparation of school personnel to invite parental involvement in and ownership of the school community.

The identity, mission, and expectations of the university-school partnership need to be clearly communicated and reinforced regularly. University personnel have begun developing a policy manual that articulates clearly the terms of the Magnificat partnership and the expectations of both the university and the schools. Additionally, the university has sought to increase the presence of university faculty and staff in the schools by dedicating additional personnel to the Magnificat partnerships. An experienced teacher was hired to work directly with teachers to deliver the services and support outlined in the agreement, while a faculty position was created both to support principals and teachers and to conduct the research and evaluation needed to adapt and revise the model. The perception of university support seems to have an effect on how teachers view the school, and the University of Notre Dame survey of United States pastors (Nuzzi et al., 2008) revealed that university support also affects how pastors view their schools. One of the teachers captured this need in the Magnificat survey, referring to the program evaluation process explicitly, writing, "I understand that you are in the process of clearly defining what it means to be a Magnificat school and I think that is the biggest improvement that needs to be made."

Finally, schools are greatly in need of financial support. Pastors identified financial challenges as among the most difficult problems facing American Catholic schools (Nuzzi et al., 2008), and the Magnificat Schools, despite all the services and supports they receive, experience these same challenges. Low teacher salaries in particular constitute an obstacle to sustained excellence in these schools, as teachers often reported that they would eventually need to leave the school to make a living or support a family. While the Magnificat relationships seem to attract highly qualified early career teachers

for the short term, most do not foresee themselves able to stay in the schools for the long term. The university must continue to learn from teachers how the partnership can serve to improve the recruitment and retention of high-quality instructors.

### Conclusion

Decades of research suggest that Catholic schools provide enormous educational opportunities and advantages, especially to poor and minority children in urban areas (Bryk, Lee, & Holland, 1993; Coleman & Hoffer, 1987; Coleman, Hoffer, & Kilgore, 1982; Evans & Schwab, 1995; Greeley, 1982; Jeynes, 2007; Neal, 1997). These opportunities and advantages are, however, lost with each Catholic school that closes, and over the past decade more than 1,000 Catholic schools have disappeared (McDonald, 2008). Many of the remaining schools face numerous challenges, and Catholic colleges and universities are, as the Notre Dame Task Force (2006) concluded, uniquely positioned to help strengthen them. Furthermore, the task force argued that Catholic institutions of higher education "have a responsibility" (p. 9) to ensure that these schools survive and thrive, because the existence and vitality of the colleges and universities depends greatly on the effective evangelization of children and families. If we accept that Catholic schools are "the single most effective means of evangelization the Church has ever created" (Nuzzi et al., 2008, p. 55), then we must mobilize the resources of our universities to strengthen them.

In its first few years, the University of Notre Dame and the Magnificat Schools have learned much about effective university-school partnerships. If a university-school partnership hopes to increase student achievement, boost enrollment, and improve teacher retention, careful attention must be devoted to ongoing program evaluation. We have learned that clear and constant communication is critical to the success of any partnership. We are convinced of the value of instructional coaches, and we are determined to focus more attention on the capacity of schools to raise funds to increase teacher salaries, to maintain up-to-date curricular materials and state-of-the-art instructional resources, and to ensure ongoing maintenance to the physical plant. We expect that the university can help schools recruit and retain excellent teachers by facilitating the formation of a network of schools and by leveraging the university's brand to attract high-quality instructors. Financial assistance is critical, both in the form of building fundraising capacity and in the provision of consulting services. Finally, clarity of program mission and identity must be consistently communicated to school personnel. The university needs to

have a visible presence in the life of the school, and personnel need to be dedicated to direct in-school support.

While there are many clear directives that emerge from this preliminary program evaluation, a number of unanswered questions remain. While it seems clear that the university needs to devote more support to building the schools' capacity to create partnerships within their local communities, the mode this support might take is unclear. Similarly, the exact constellation of services and supports needed to achieve comprehensive school reform is yet to be determined. Because of the high costs involved in developing and delivering supports and services, ongoing evaluation is needed to determine which services are the most critical and which are expendable.

As Bryk (2009) noted, Catholic institutions of higher education can serve schools by developing people through their teacher and principal formation programs, by developing tools, by conducting research on teaching and learning, and by strengthening institutions by offering services and supports in the context of university-school partnerships. With its ACE and ACE Leadership programs, the University of Notre Dame has established a track record of developing people for Catholic K-12 schools. The Magnificat Schools represent the University of Notre Dame's nascent effort to strengthen the institutions more comprehensively. While some revisions to the Magnificat partnership model have already been implemented and others will be made in the coming months, this process of ongoing evaluation will continue to inform the University of Notre Dame's efforts to serve Catholic K-12 schools. The Magnificat School partnerships already look quite different than when they were established 3 years ago, and we expect they will continue to evolve as we learn more about the capacity of universities to effect comprehensive school improvement.

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